Violence in the Workplace

Workplace Violence

Workplace violence is violence or the threat of violence against workers. It includes harassment, verbal abuse, threatening behavior, fighting and physical assaults, and sometimes homicide. Workplace violence can occur inside or outside of the workplace. One inclusive definition of workplace violence is "any intentional act that creates a hostile work environment." Although no one can predict when a violent act will occur, steps can be taken to increase personal safety and reduce risk to the organization.

Jobs: Which have More Risk

According to the United States Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, violence is the leading cause of death for women in the workplace and the second leading cause of death for men. Each year 2 million American workers are victims of violence at work, ranging from intimidating threats to homicide. Some workers are at increased risk of workplace violence, but no one is immune. Those at most risk include workers who exchange money with the public; deliver passengers, goods, or services; or work alone or in small groups during late night, or early morning hours in high-crime areas. Jobs that have frequent contact with the public usually have more risk.

Who is at Risk?

Taxi drivers have the highest risk of being killed in workplace-related violence, but high-risk occupations also include healthcare workers and social service workers, visiting nurses, psychiatric evaluators, probation officers, gas and water utility employees, phone and cable TV installers, letter carriers, and retail workers.

Warning Signs

The following signs and symptoms are common among employees who have been violent at work:

- Suspicious or paranoid of coworkers;
- Delusional beliefs about others in the workplace, especially the supervisor;
- Having an uncontrollable temper;
- Prone to arguing with coworkers or supervisors;
- Drug and/or alcohol abuse;
- Repeated threats or having a history of making threats;
- Fascination with weapons;
- Sympathizing with perpetrators of work place violence reported in the media;
- Desperation over a disciplinary action;
- Financial crisis;
- Recent rejection or suddenly failed romantic relationships;
- Being ridiculed or degraded by others;
- Victims of bullying perpetrated by coworkers.

Prevention: Do's and Don'ts

- Do take threats of workplace violence seriously.
- Don't say, "It can't happen here."
- Do understand any existing policy on workplace violence.
- Do follow safety and prevention guidelines offered by your organization.
- Don't dismiss threats of violence as "venting" or "blowing off steam." (Most incidents of workplace homicide followed threats that were not taken seriously.)
- Do discourage disrespect and degrading behavior toward others.
- Do report offensive or intimidating behavior in the workplace toward others.
- Do learn how to recognize, avoid, or safely diffuse potentially violent situations by attending personal safety training programs available through work or in your community.
- Do alert supervisors to any concerns about safety or security and report all incidents immediately in writing.
- Do avoid traveling alone in unfamiliar locations or situations whenever possible.
- Do carry only minimal money and necessary identification into unfamiliar community settings.

If You Become a Victim

If you are a victim of workplace violence, report the incident. Don't blame yourself for being a victim. Work closely with your organization in reporting the incident to police. Incidents of workplace violence are often traumatic. Even if you were not injured, you may still experience a normal, but traumatic psychological response to the incident. This could affect your health or job performance. If a critical incident stress debriefing is offered, be sure to attend. Don't avoid a debriefing by thinking, "I don't need it."

What the EAP Can Do

The EAP can offer you confidential support and referral to community resources if you are a victim of workplace violence. If you are unsure about how to respond to a violent incident or are concerned about a potentially violent incident, the EAP can help you determine what steps to take. Many EAPs offer onsite support or critical incident stress debriefings to employee groups affected by workplace violence. Be sure to ask about what services are available.